



IdeAs

Idées d'Amérique

7 | Printemps/Été 2016

Cinéma et histoire dans les Amériques

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/1398>

DOI: 10.4000/ideas.1398

ISSN: 1950-5701

Publisher

Institut des Amériques

Electronic reference

Jules Boykoff and Gilmar Mascarenhas, « Rio 2016: Urban policies and environmental impacts », *IdeAs* [Online], 7 | Printemps/Été 2016, Online since 03 June 2016, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ideas/1398> ; DOI : 10.4000/ideas.1398

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.



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Rio 2016: Urban policies and environmental impacts

Jules Boykoff and Gilmar Mascarenhas

Introduction

- 1 Rio de Janeiro has a storied record of supporting environmental action. The city twice hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: in 1992 when it was more widely known as the “Earth Summit” and in 2012, when it was called “Rio+20.” During this time period, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) amplified its rhetorical commitment to environmental sustainability, although host-city follow-through was routinely lacking. This historical backdrop raised the question: could the Rio 2016 Olympics sync ambitious rhetoric with ecological progress? The answer has been an emphatic “no.” For various reasons, Olympic organizers and city officials have failed to achieve every major environmental legacy they promised ahead of the 2016 Games, which take place from August 5 to 21.
- 2 In the twenty-first century, Olympic hosts are expected to proclaim a lofty list of “legacy” projects that will remain after the Games, programs and infrastructure that will purportedly benefit the host city years into the future. In the modern era, several Olympic “legacy” projects gleam green. The Rio 2016 Games exemplify this trend. To marshal public support, organizers declared more than twenty-five legacies: about half either directly addressed environmental issues (e.g. remediation of Guanabara Bay’s notorious waters) or indirectly signaled environmental benefits (e.g. building up public transport networks like the Bus Rapid Transit [BRT] system) (Santos Junior et al 2015).
- 3 The original Rio 2016 candidature, submitted to the IOC in 2009, emphasized environmental commitment. The Olympic bid pledged, “The 2016 Games will accelerate several important environmental projects bringing direct benefits to local communities including regeneration of urban areas, air quality improvement and reduced consumption of non-renewable natural resources” (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 1, 37). Bidders

advanced a “‘Green Games for a Blue Planet’ vision for the Rio Games” (95) that combined the resources of federal, state, and local governments. In this article we examine the evidence and find that these promises, in general, have not been met.

A panoramic view

- 4 To many *cariocas* these bold environmental promises had a haunting ring. In the competition to stage the 2007 Pan-American Games, bidders vowed water cleanup and upgraded housing, but after hosting the Pan-Ams, the waterways stayed polluted and, it turns out, the athlete village was built on environmentally delicate peat land (Curi, Knijnik, and Mascarenhas 2011). Environmental assurances remained unfulfilled.
- 5 Rio’s Olympic bid promised to finally follow through and clean up Guanabara Bay, which will host the sailing competition, and of the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, which will be home to rowing, canoeing, and kayaking. And bidders declared that two sanitation programs—at Barra-Jacarepaguá in western Rio and at Guanabara Bay in the east—would “result in more than 80% of overall sewage collected and treated by 2016” (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 1, 97). However, as the Games neared, it became clear that these ambitious projects were not on pace. In April 2015 around forty tons of dead fish mysteriously appeared at Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas. This followed two months after a similar calamity in Guanabara Bay where another massive fish die-off occurred (Wade 2015). Rio Governor Luiz Fernando Pezão stunned many when he publicly pushed back the estimated finish date for Guanabara Bay’s cleanup from 2016 to 2035 (Barchfield 2015).
- 6 Given the inability to solve the environmental woes of Guanabara Bay, some suggested transferring the sailing competition to Buzios, approximately 150 kilometers from Rio. A number of Olympic committees, including from the US, supported the move, but they were rebuffed by Games organizers (Dolzan 2015). In light of the ever-changing dynamics, the World Sailing Federation forged a Flexibility Plan to reduce the risks for athletes (Estado de São Paulo, 2016).
- 7 Olympic organizers also broke their promises related to tree planting. To offset carbon emissions, Rio 2016 pledged to plant 24 million trees by 2016 (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 1, 33). Carlos Minc, the State of Rio de Janeiro’s Secretary for the Environment, escalated the promise to 34 million trees (Konchinski 2015). However, the “Rio 2016 Sustainability Report” issued in 2014 conspicuously made no mention of the tree-planting initiative. Instead, Rio organizers heralded the launch of its “Embrace Sustainability” program, with Dow—the “official chemistry company of the Olympic Games”—the program’s inaugural member (Rio 2016 Organizing Committee 2014). By Spring 2015, environmental officials admitted that only 5.5 million trees had been planted and that Rio 2016 was on track to plant only around 8 million trees before the Games commenced, merely a third of the 24 million enumerated in the bid and less than a quarter of Minc’s promise (Konchinski 2015).
- 8 The Olympic golf course also raised environmental questions. Golf was returning to the Olympics after a 112-year hiatus. This development was widely welcomed by Rio 2016 project managers, which was no surprise, considering that the city has been governed by urban entrepreneurialism for the past two decades (Harvey 2011; Vainer 2000; Mascarenhas 2011). This urban management model is notable for its ‘market-friendly’ attitudes and for public policies—like public-private partnerships—that aggressively

attract and enable private investment. The construction of Rio's Olympic golf course is a classic example of such public-private partnerships, configured alongside real-estate interests and tailored to meet their needs. The sport of golf implies a particular social status that chimes with these class interests. Conveniently, golf also demands significant chunks of quiet green space; this, in turn, enhances real-estate values (Bale 1993).

- 9 Building a new golf course for the Olympics was optional. Rio already has two elite courses—Gávea Golf Club and Itanhangá Golf Club—that have staged major tournaments. In fact, Rio Olympic bidders touted this history (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 2, 165). One could fathom renovating one of the existing courses to meet Olympic standards. But Rio's Olympic Delivery Authority claimed Gávea Golf Club lacked the space to expand and Itanhangá Golf Club did not have necessary drainage and irrigation. Olympic officials argued that fixing up Itanhangá would have been just as costly as building a brand new course (Autoridade Pública Olímpica 2015).
- 10 Olympic organizers were fortunate to have numerous potential locations to choose from for the new golf course, including inside the Deodoro Olympic area situated inside a working-class suburb of Rio. But the new course was instead built in Barra da Tijuca, a wealthy western suburb that doubles as a high-end real-estate zone. The goal was clear: to maximize profits. To pull this off, Rio Mayor Rio Eduardo Paes hatched an audacious political maneuver made easier by the Olympic state of exception. In an emergency session just before Christmas 2012, Paes shepherded to passage a seemingly innocuous "Complementary Law 125" that was full of dubious maneuvers including the circumvention of environmental impact reports and the sidestepping of cumbersome public hearings. Beyond this, Mayor Paes orchestrated a massive real-estate deal that looked like a pretext for land speculation: private developers covered the cost of the golf course's construction in exchange for the right to build 140 luxury apartments around the course and garner all the profits from their sale (Hodges 2014).
- 11 The golf course's location was also controversial. Again, environmental issues were downplayed. The course overlapped Marapendi Nature Reserve, an ecologically sensitive area protected by law since 1959 that was home to numerous threatened species. In building the course, vegetation and natural habitat was decimated. This sparked intense resistance from activist groups like "Golfe Para Quem?" ("Golf For Whom?") and "Ocupa Golfe" ("Occupy Golf"). The groups brought together biologists and environmental lawyers to rally alongside street activists to try to halt the construction. The government heavily repressed the movement and the project proceeded apace. The entire episode clanged dissonantly against Rio 2016's proclaimed environmental ethos and the specific ecological promises it laid out in its Olympic bid (Boykoff 2016).
- 12 To be sure, the Olympics have jumpstarted some positive environmental developments. The extension of the Metro—known as Linha 4—will ease travel between the notorious stretch of snarled traffic between the tourist-friendly Zona Sul and the Olympic epicenter in Barra da Tijuca. Although construction is woefully behind schedule, after the Games, Linha 4 will remain in place for *cariocas* to use—part of a "sustainable transport legacy" (Rio 2016, 2009, Vol. 3, p. 97). The introduction of VLT transport system (tramway), with electric low-noise vehicles is also positive. Yet, a road-oriented, high-polluting urban policy, remains in place, including through the BRT system, the city's main mobility project.

Conclusion

- 13 The 2016 Rio Olympics bring into sharp focus the gap between environmental word and deed. While the UN's recent environmental plan (2015, 10)—“Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”—asserts that “Sport is...an important enabler of sustainable development,” we have seen that the IOC—a close UN ally—has allowed sport to enable greenwashing. In Rio, green branding has trumped material environmental change. Neither Guanabara Bay, nor the local lakes and rivers have been decontaminated to the degree promised. By March 2015, the Brazilian press reported that *none* of the major environmental projects related to the Olympics would be finished before the Games began (Konchinski 2016).
- 14 An academic consensus has emerged that in practice, sports mega-events like the Olympic Games are not sustainability enhancers, despite the rhetoric emerging from the IOC and local organizing committees. Hosting the Olympics does not automatically translate into positive environmental legacies after the event. As John Karamichas (2013, 203) asserts, “no causality was identified between Olympic Games hosting and improvements in the EM [ecological modernization] capacity of the host nation.” Environmental accountability is seriously lacking. Even in a place like Rio, with its rich history of environmental concern, a gaping chasm exists between green rhetoric and reality.

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